



News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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January 12, 2004 Governor Walker Proclaims January as Birth Defect Prevention Month

*Governor Walker to Sign Proclamation, Monday, January 12, 11 am, Governor's Office, State Capitol
Folic Acid Consumption to help Prevent Birth Defects Higher Among Utah Women*

(Salt Lake City, UT) - Recognizing that birth defects affect more than 1,400 babies in Utah each year and are a leading cause of infant death, Governor Olene S. Walker has proclaimed January 2004 as Birth Defect Prevention Month. The March of Dimes and the Utah Department of Health, Birth Defect Network, have joined forces to educate women about what they can do to increase their chances of having a healthy baby.

“While the causes of most birth defects are not known, there are a number of ways a women can reduce her risk of having a baby with a birth defect,” says Amy Nance, UDOH’s Birth Defect Network study coordinator. “One important way simply involves taking a multivitamin containing folic acid before pregnancy”.

Studies show that taking the B vitamin folic acid before pregnancy decreases the risk of having a pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect (NTD) by at least 50 percent. The two most common NTD’s are spina bifida and anencephaly. NTD’s occur very early in pregnancy, by 30 days after conception, before a women even knows she is pregnant. According to Nance, the Utah data shows NTD affected pregnancy are more likely to occur in woman under 30 who have already had at least one pregnancy.

Women who are planning a pregnancy should begin taking a multivitamin with folic acid at least three months before getting pregnant. However, since about half of all pregnancies are unplanned it is important that all women of childbearing years take a multivitamin with folic acid every day whether they plan to get pregnant or not.

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Despite the importance of folic acid, a national report commissioned by the March of Dimes in 2003 found that 21 percent of the women surveyed knew that folic acid helped to prevent birth defects and 32 percent consumed folic acid daily. Reported intake of folic acid was highest in the West (39 percent) and lowest in the South (28 percent). The corresponding percentage for the Midwest was 34 percent and 32 percent in the East. Utah women fared somewhat better than women nationwide. A statewide survey conducted by the Utah Department of Health showed 45.6 percent of women knew that folic acid helped to prevent birth defects and 40.8 percent consumed folic acid daily. While this is an improvement over the national statistics there is still more education needed for women entering their childbearing years as well as women 15-44 years old to take a multivitamin with folic acid. The March of Dimes continues to urge *all women capable of having a baby* to take a daily multivitamin containing folic acid to prevent neural tube defects. Health care professionals can help by using every contact with women ages 15-44 to advise them to take a multivitamin. The Utah Folic Acid Council (a multi-agency taskforce) has been providing statewide education to women and health care providers since 1996.

According to the Utah Department of Health, Birth Defect Network, there are other maternal health conditions, or medications used to treat specific conditions, that can increase the risk of having a baby with a birth defect. Women who have diabetes, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, hypertension or other medical conditions should visit with a health care provider before becoming pregnant. Women who take medications for these conditions and who become pregnant, are advised not to stop taking their medications, but talk with their health care provider as soon as possible.

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In September 2002, the Utah Birth Defect Network was awarded a grant from CDC to become one of the ten centers' nationally for birth defect research and prevention. The Center works to prevent birth defects and developmental disabilities, promote optimal child development, and protect the health and welfare of Americans affected with birth defects and disabilities. This study will dramatically increase our understanding of the causes of birth defects and will provide information for developing effective programs to prevent the tragedy of birth defects.

For more information about birth defects, prevention, and resources for families, contact the March of Dimes at 293-3300 or the Utah Department of Health, Birth Defect Network at 801-257-0566 ext. 201 or toll-free 1-866-818-7096. For questions regarding drugs or other exposure during pregnancy, contact the Pregnancy RiskLine at 801-328-2229 or 1-800-822-2229.

The March of Dimes is a national voluntary health agency whose mission is to improve the health of babies by preventing birth defects and infant mortality. Founded in 1938, the March of Dimes funds programs of research, community services, education, and advocacy to save babies. For more information, visit the March of Dimes Web site at www.marchofdimes.com or its Spanish Web site at www.nacersano.org. For free access to national, state and county-level statistics related to perinatal health visit March of Dimes Peristats at www.marchofdimes.com/peristats.